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Chapter 1 by Watchdog

Chapter One

The bunks of the Endar Spire weren't comfortable by any standard. Quite truthfully, they were comparable to rocks, and the crew of the massive warship spent many sleepless nights rolling around in search of a comfortable position atop them.

The port-stern dormitories were probably the worst. To add to the discomfort, the rooms were backed up directly next to the Spire's engines, and the idea of "peace and quiet" was easily drowned out by the hum of the vast machines powering the vessel.

Those port dormitories were reserved for the newer recruits, fresh out of the academies, and for this mission, they'd picked up a lot of them. "Fresh meat," or "Noobs," as they were referred to by the more seasoned Republic soldiers.

"Noobs" coming from the younger officers who had been in the recruits' shoes merely months earlier.

Of the several academy-fresh soldiers who had taken up residence in the cramped port dorms, only one seemed to be able to get a decent rest on those rock-hard metal planks that were passed as bunks. It was a talent, one he proudly and jokingly reminded his peers of as they

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recently claimed the Endar Spire as their home. It was a ship that had been built in the early twentieth century, designed to withstand the constant battles of the Clone Wars. It had seen its share of battles and skirmishes, and it had survived. This was no different. So this commando-like module of the Resistance of Star Wars perfectly

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content with the way his life had turned out. An orphan raised by the streets of Coruscant, without a cent to his name, he had to believe that volunteering for the military was one of his smarter decisions in life. Free food, free beds, friends at his side- they all beat what he'd grown up with.

As much a deep dreamer as he was a deep sleeper, Seth had been experiencing one of those rather odd, memory-like dreams on the morning of the day his life was turned upside down. Two shadowy figures argued, their tones rising in decibel until they were practically shouting at each other. He couldn't see faces. He never could. And in this dream he shrank back against a figure barely bigger than he was and he felt very small indeed. He could almost feel rather than see a fair-skinned hand grasp his pudgy, smaller one, and Seth the sixteen year old felt as if he were seeing through the eyes of Seth the three year old. And a little girl's voice hushed him and told him it was going to be fine, and that they'd stop. He turned to look at her, but she was hidden by the shadows just as the others were.

And then her voice came again, but it was much deeper. Almost teenage-boy-deep, it seemed. And she was telling him to wake up. Three-year-old Seth furrowed his eyebrows. He was awake, wasn't he?

And now she was hitting him hard in the ribcage. So much for her soothing words. Three-year-old Seth mumbled a few obscenities that no three-year-old had any business mumbling, and through blurred vision saw the girl transform into a teenage boy right before his eyes. He rubbed at his pupils, closed his eyelids, and opened them again, and the surroundings of his dream were gone. He looked down at his body and saw not the pudgy form of a three-year-old, but the toned, lean muscles of a sixteen year old. Seth glanced up again groggily at the "girl," who was actually another of the recruits, dressed in Republic oranges and golds and shaking him awake violently.

Seth groaned and licked dry lips. "Iggy?" he mumbled.

"No, Bendak Starkiller," the taller, lanky boy said with a roll of his eyes, his tone dripping with sarcasm. "Who else would it be, di'kut?"

"Sleeping in again, Avery?" Draven Melik laughed, grinning at the other teen.

Seth stifled a yawn and sat up, popping several joints in his back as he went. "What time is it?"

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It wasn't a far venture from the dormitories. A few twists and turns, left, then right, then left again, and he was at the Endar Spire's command center. The other recruits were lined up in classic military fashion, their backs straight, their hands crisply saluting the officer in front of them. Officer Dannit to be exact. Seth hadn't exactly taken a liking to Dannit, and the officer seemed to mutualize that feeling.

"You're late, Avery!" he barked even as Seth tried to subtly slip into formation with the others. "Sorry, sir," Seth said confidently, standing straight and tall as he'd learned at the academy. Dannit turned to the rest of the recruits, pacing back and forth in front of them as he prepared his lecture. "Tardiness is one thing that will not be tolerated by the Republic. If you are late on the battlefield, there's a good chance you'll get yourself killed. There's a good chance you could get your company killed. There's a good chance that you could be the one person who sets the Sith on the brink of victory. In this war, there is no room for errors such as tardiness. Avery here was late to his promotion to private, and therefore, he will not be promoted with the rest of you!"

Seth felt his stomach drop. Becoming private was like being officially initiated into the Republic fleet. It was all he had to live for. And it had just slipped out of his fingertips, just like that, because he'd slept in?

He could feel their eyes on him. Some out of pity, some out of some sort of smug superiorism. Seth wanted to speak up. To fend for himself. But speaking out of line would only demoralize him further in the Officer's eyes.

"Hey, now, Dannit," a gravelly, gentle voice called from beyond the recruits. Seth turned to see the broad, proud form of Captain Carth Onasi overlooking the predicament, his hands clasped behind his back and his stubbled chin raised in superiority. He glanced down at Seth with chocolate eyes and let his lips quirk into an amused smile. "I don't think minor breaks in protocol warrant a refusal of a position within our fleet, does it?"

Dannit stood stick straight, rigid in his salute. "Sir, you don't understand what it's like to have this boy under your command, with all due respect. He's brash, arrogant, cocky in every sense of the word—"

"And probably one of the best damn recruits we grabbed from the Academy," Carth finished, a

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Dannit's jaw dropped. "Sir, you really can't be serious about—"

"He was handpicked for this mission from hundreds of recruits by Commander Shan herself," Onasi hissed, jabbing a finger into Dannit's chest with every enunciated word. Seth felt the eyes of his pupils on him again, this time in awe. His own heart even fluttered a bit at this bit of news. He had already known he was one of the best recruits the academy had sent to the Spire. He'd already known that he was regarded by his instructors as, in the words of Drill Sergeant Walters, "one of the best damn soldiers ever to be trained for the Republic." But to be handpicked by one of the Republic's most revered and well-known Jedi, whether or not she was but a Padawan, rocked his perception of himself and his role in the fleet. And while his ego may have grown a bit from the revelation, it came with a deep sense of honor and responsibility placed on his shoulders.

Dannit saluted to the Captain, squaring his shoulders, and continued to pace along the line of recruits as if the incident with Seth had never happened. "You started this journey as mere cadets, graduates of the Coruscant Military Academy. Now, you are officially soldiers of the Republic, fighting for the grand cause of protecting our great society from the evils of the Sith Empire and all others who threaten democracy. Though this is a milestone in your military careers, it is only the beginning. Some of you may never advance past the rank of private. Perhaps you will make it to the rank of General one day. Either way, all you do from this point forward is for the glory of the Republic. I hereby grant you all the rank of Private in the Republic navy. Congratulations soldiers, your journey has just begun."

"Goodbye port dorms, and hello paradise!" Iggy cheered as he packed up his footlocker.

Seth smiled to himself as he packed his own footlocker. "I wouldn't exactly say they're paradise, Ig."

"Gotta be better than these dorms," another recruit chimed in. Iggy beamed.

"Exactly, don't be so negative, Avery!"

"Yeah, 'specially after all that special treatment from the Captain, what'd you do to earn that?"

Seth shrugged. "I dunno, maybe being one of the best damn recruits here had something to do with it."

"Humble too" Draven muttered irritably

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His attempt to diffuse the situation failed miserably as Seth spun instantly and covered the distance between himself and Draven with a single leap. Pinning the older boy by the neck against the ground with his forearm, Seth bared his teeth in the cadet's pale face. "You wanna know why I'm so damn good at what I do? Because I was shooting pistols and piloting speeders before I was ten. Because I knew exactly when to hold my tongue and when to speak out. Because I knew how to read people and I knew how to analyze threats. Because I grew up fending for my life and learning more about survival than any academy training simulation could ever teach you. Because I got into that academy due to sheer willpower and ability. Not like you could say the same thing. You got in because your parents had mounds of credits and spoon-fed you everything you ever wanted, and you're about to get a mad reality check on the battlefield. And if you keep running your mouth about me being a street rat, I'd be more than happy to give you that reality check right now."

Seth felt rather than saw Draven's balled up fist hook around towards his face. The sixteen year old jerked back instinctively, and Draven only narrowly clipped his chin. Seth returned by grabbing the boy's wrist, twisting it behind him with one hand and delivering a powerful left hook at the boy's exposed face. Blood spurted from Draven's nose and the pale boy dove at Seth, knocking him off balance. Seth crossed his arms over his face to guard himself from Draven's wailing blows and spun on his back to force his heel upwards against the other recruit's diaphragm. Draven wheezed, struggling to draw breath in, and Seth shoved him to the ground.

"Break it up!" an older voice barked in a commanding tone even as Iggy dragged Seth away from the fight. In the doorway towered a platinum-haired soldier clad head to toe in Republic armor, glaring at the two privates.

Draven spat blood from his mouth and saluted the man. Seth resignedly did the same. "Sir." "Trask Ulgo. I'm your new bunkmate, Avery. I was coming to help you bring your things to the other side of the ship, but I have the feeling lugging a massive footlocker across a Republic warship is just what you need to clear your head."

"I apologize, sir. It won't happen again."

"Better not. This is off the record. Next time, I won't hesitate to tell a superior officer."

*

I've been looking forward to this chapter since the day I first started reading the story. I'm starting with Trask Ulgo because he's the most interesting character in the book so far. He's a bit of a jerk, but he's also very determined and has a lot of potential. I hope he'll become a good friend to Avery.

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"Long," Seth admitted. "Quiet. They had us stacking cargo for hours because patrols were so uneventful. Not that I didn't expect it. Not like we're gonna round a corner and run into a Sith squadron while we're patrolling a ship floating outside of Taris's atmosphere."

"You never know, we have those patrols for a reason," Trask said with a shrug. "And on that note, I'd better head out and do my part." He stood, straightening his uniform, and clapped Seth on the back before heading out to patrol.

The boy lowered himself slowly onto the edge of his bunk, peeling off his boots and uniform and throwing them to the floor, too exhausted to place them in the footlocker sitting at the opposite end of the room. He fell backward onto his pillow in nothing but his boxers, hoping for at least an hour of sleep and praying that the nightmares wouldn't interfere.

An hour was about all he got, for an explosion rocked him out of bed and onto the floor not long after he'd slipped into the blissful oblivion of sleep. Seth blinked the drowsiness from his eyes, trying to make the connection in his still-half-asleep mind as to how he'd ended up with his cheek pressed against the cold durasteel flooring of the Endar Spire, and why that blasted alarm was so damn loud. A second explosion shook the tiredness from his mind completely, and he bolted upward, alert. He heard the faint hiss of the dormitory door open above the noise of the alarms, and Seth dove for the closest weapon he could find – his boot.

Trask sprinted through the open door, dressed head to toe in Republic combat gear. He glanced down at the underwear-clad, boot-armed Private with a brief look of bewilderment. "Gear up, Avery, we gotta get out of here!"

Seth allowed a moment to let the shock of his situation register, before clambering for the footlocker. His regulation armor, tossed carelessly about the cabin just hours before, was too scattered for him to worry about, so Seth grabbed a pair of spacer pants and a combat jacket and proceeded to get dressed faster than he'd ever done before. "What's going on, Trask?" he yelled over the sound of the still-blaring alarms as he sheathed his shortsword and holstered his blaster.

"Sith!" Trask replied. "We gotta get up to the bridge and find Commander Shan!"

Bastila Shan. Seth had never met the Jedi who'd handpicked his position aboard the Endar Spire, but her reputation preceded her. Only a few years his elder, she had already made quite a

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Seth nodded at Trask before bolting out of the cabin and down the corridor. The two of them headed toward the bridge, Captain.

The last voice called over the intercom was the one of the most recognizable in the galaxy: Captain.

was the only other audible noise Seth could hear as he and Trask sprinted down the corridor. It was only when he and Trask had been running for a good five minutes or so that the first sounds of battle came within earshot. Trask whipped out his pistol, motioning for Seth to do the same. "What was that about never having to worry about rounding a corner and seeing a Sith squadron?" the older soldier remarked. Seth's cheeks would have burned hot with embarrassment had his stomach not worked itself into a tight knot. He'd been in plenty of skirmishes in his childhood on Coruscant, and had even experienced the dreaded 'first kill' years before, but never before had he seen actual battle against trained soldiers. And he knew no amount of academy training or previous experience could have prepared him for it.

Still, his pistol was a comforting weight in his palm, and as he rounded the corner and caught his first glimpse of the silver armor that would soon become an all-too-familiar sight in his life, he rolled onto one knee and put the soldier in his sights. Trask fired immediately, giving what Seth assumed was an all-clear signal. The Sith soldiers retaliated almost immediately, and blaster fire whizzed past the sixteen year old much too close for comfort. He squeezed the trigger, popping several shots into the trooper's chest before switching targets to take down another soldier coming around his left.

"Not bad, kid," Trask commented as the skirmish died down. "But those were only a few stragglers, the fighting's thickest on the bridge, we gotta get up there and help!"

Seth nodded, and the two went running down the halls of the Spire once again. He didn't bother to holster his pistol, although he did click the safety, letting it swing in his hand as he ran. When the doors opened to reveal the bridge, Seth felt his stomach drop. It was silent as a graveyard, and may as well have been one. Bodies littered the floor, orange and silver armor alike. He stepped forward, over a fallen Sith soldier's corpse, and took in the carnage even as he walked through it.

"A-Avery?" a weak voice coughed. Seth's head jerked to the left in search of the source of the sound, and there Draven sat propped up against a console, a sizeable gash torn across his chest. Blood seeped from his armor, gathering along the edges and threatening to spill over. Seth felt his heart leap up into his throat at the sight of all the blood. "Oh man," he whispered shakily, his hands trembling as he pressed them against his comrade's wound, trying to stop the

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"Avery, we don't have a lot of time, the Sith are going to blow the Spire to dust if they don't get their hands on Shan," Trask reminded him, although he got down on one knee and took the medpac from Seth to inject it into Draven's bloodstream. "Stand him up, we gotta hurry."

Seth slung Draven's right arm around his shoulders and pulled the other soldier to his feet. Draven whimpered at the pain but managed to bite down hard on his lip to avoid crying out in pain. He was a sturdy, muscular guy, and Seth's knees nearly buckled at the unexpected and sudden amount of weight they were carrying. "Can you move your legs?"

Draven nodded. "They got me up top, my legs are fine. And the medpac's kicking in already." He took a cautious step forward, managing to move despite the reliance on Seth to hold up the weight of his body.

"I'll take point," Trask told them. "Keep your gun up, Avery, you're shooting for two now." They trekked onward through the eerily silent Spire, stepping over corpses and trying not to focus on the very plausible idea that they could be the only ones left alive on the ship. It seemed as though the Sith had pulled out a majority of their troops after the massacre of the Endar Spire's crew, leaving behind a few shock troops to deal with survivors and perform a final sweep for Bastila, as they'd encountered shortly after leaving the bridge. Trask took them down quickly while Seth ensured Draven's safety, but every time they stopped Seth knew it stole precious time from their efforts to get to the escape pods before the Sith blew the warship into oblivion.

"We're getting close," Trask told them. "The escape pods should be just—"

Seth had to look up from making sure Draven was alright to see what caused his bunkmate to cut himself off so suddenly. He felt his heart leap into his throat, however, when he saw the man standing in the hall perpendicular to where the three Republic soldiers had stopped. A smirk formed on the man's face, his yellowing eyes narrowing at the three as he turned his shaven head to face them. A chill gripped Seth's spine and reached down into his very soul and he didn't have to see the blood red lightsaber blade to know that this man was a dark Jedi.

The sound of metal scraping against metal caught Seth's ear, and in his peripheral vision he saw Trask unsheathing his vibroblade. The boy's voice was still caught in his throat, but he managed to give the older man a look of alarm.

"He'll never make it out of here in time, and he won't make it without you. If you make it out, tell

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red as the blade of the saber that moments earlier he was sure was the blade that would end his life. He balled his fist up tighter, his fingernails digging into the soft flesh of his palm and his knuckles turning white. He'd been fighting the Sith for a cause up until this moment. But now that cause had become so much more real to him. He hated the Sith. He hated the needless loss of innocent Republic lives. And he had never been more sure of his decision to commit his life to bringing each and every one of the members of the Sith Empire to justice.

"Avery, he's gone," Draven said quietly, leaning heavily against the wall opposite Seth.

"I know," Seth said through gritted teeth, unable to lift his head to meet Draven's eyes.

The other recruit sighed, and attempted to stand a little straighter despite his injury. "I'm sorry, man. It's not fair. The Sith play dirty. And they'll pay for it but we gotta get out of here. Trask bought us time but he isn't gonna hold off a dark Jedi for long."

Seth nodded, pulling his fist from its place against the durasteel door. "Yeah." He moved over to Draven and once again tucked his shoulders beneath the other boy's arm for support.

They hadn't made it very far when Seth's comlink went off, using the Spire's emergency channel. He stopped, making sure Draven could stand on his own, before pulling out the device and activating it. Captain Onasi's stubbled face popped up on the screen between bouts of static. "Avery, Melik, I'm tracking your position through the Spire's life support systems. Commander Shan's escape pod is away. You need to make your way through this next corridor and get out of here before the Sith blows the Endar Spire into galactic dust – we can't wait for you much longer! You have a clear path unless the Sith decide to send another boarding party."

"Yes, Sir. Trask–"

"I know what happened to Ensign Ulgo," Onasi said quietly. "You need to make sure that sacrifice wasn't in vain. Get your ass to the escape pods, soldier. That's an order."

It didn't take long for Seth to lead Draven to the escape pod bay, and by the time they had gotten there the other boy was beginning to stand on his own once again. He winced as he lifted an arm to salute Officer Dannit and Captain Onasi.

"Damn, Melik, you look like shit," Dannit grunted.

"Just glad to be alive, sir," Draven wheezed. "Got Avery to thank for that."

"There are limited medical supplies under the escape pod seats and enough ammo to last you a

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Seth saluted the officer before Dannit climbed into the escape pod after Draven and closed the door. With a hiss, the pod shot off towards the surface of the planet below. Seth turned to Onasi, who was waiting at the entrance to the Spire's final escape pod, and he was hit with the sudden realization that they were the final surviving members of the crew. "Come on, Avery," Captain Onasi chided. "Trask risked his life for you to make it to this pod. After you." Seth slid into the cramped space, fastening the seat straps around his chest as best as he could with trembling hands. Onasi climbed in after him, and within second of hitting the launch button the escape pod was hurtling towards the ecumenopolis of Taris. Through the viewport, Seth could see the Endar Spire first breaking in half longways before exploding in a magnificent display of red and orange. Seth could feel the temperature within the escape pod raise significantly as it entered Taris' atmosphere, before his clumsily-strapped seatbelt became undone and he was hurled into the hard durasteel of the pod's interior upon impact with the planet. He saw white for a moment, his ears ringing, before he was aware of Onasi's hands on either of his shoulders yanking him from the pod out into Taris's cityscape. His head seemed to be splitting with pain, and Seth closed his eyes for just a moment before slipping into blissful oblivion.

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